

'Seek and Destroy'

In his final days as state superintendent of public instruction, Randy Dorn keeps shouting on behalf of schools. Has anyone listened?

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Milken Family Foundation photo - Randy Dorn says, "If I don't do what I'm doing, I'm not upholding the laws of the state of Washington."

Randy Dorn thought he could make a difference. In 2008, he campaigned for Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction because he said there had been little progress in state funding of K-12 education in past years.

"Where are we now? Still studying how to fund basic education. Still arguing about how to implement education reform," he wrote in a 2008 press release.

He thought he could change that.

Dorn said that as state superintendent, he would remind state lawmakers that it is their "paramount duty" to fully fund basic education, rather than relying on local levies. He would use his experience as a former teacher, a coach, a school principal and state representative to enact change.

But now, eight years later, the issue of how to fund education in Washington remains more contentious than ever, following the Washington Supreme Court's 2012 *McCleary* decision calling for ample funding of basic K-12 education. Dorn, the single most vocal proponent of more state education funding, prepares to leave his post frustrated that

lawmakers haven't listened, despite his increasingly aggressive and controversial tactics.

This year alone, Dorn announced he might run for governor, then announced he would not two months later — a move he admits was only intended to force the other gubernatorial candidates to discuss education. He recommended that the state Supreme Court increase sanctions on lawmakers until *McCleary* is paid for, even though the legislature is already being fined \$100,000 per day by the state Supreme Court. He suggested that the court shut down schools altogether to force the legislature's hand. Most recently, he filed a lawsuit against seven of the largest school districts in the state, arguing that their use of local levies is unconstitutional.

Dorn knows his combative strategy hasn't always made him popular. But he says rather than please adults, he'd rather be remembered as being the No. 1 advocate for kids.

"I'm not a quarterback. I played linebacker. Seek and destroy was my mission statement. I wasn't this calm, cool, collected, say all the right anecdotal things and stuff. I speak in short bursts and get my point across," he says.

"I'm Randy Dorn. I don't know how to be somebody other than Randy Dorn."

In 2013, Dorn was optimistic. The economy was improving, and the state House voted to allocate \$1.4 billion for education, a number that would have put the state on pace to fulfill *McCleary* obligations.

His outlook is more grim now. That \$1.4 billion wasn't approved by the state Senate. To make matters worse, he says, a looming "levy cliff" — a reduction in how much money districts can collect through local property tax levies — could cut millions from district budgets in the 2017-18 school year.

He fears that come May of 2017, lawmakers will not have settled on a budget. He worries that districts will be forced to hand their teachers pink slips, that class sizes will shoot up, that unhappy parents will storm Olympia.

This fear, he says, has driven his increased pressure on the legislature to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling.

"I'm committed to making that happen," Dorn says. "And I'm gonna do everything in my power, everything possible, to increase the pressure."

But his latest move of suing Spokane and six other school districts has drawn criticism from both lawmakers and district officials. The lawsuit alleges that their use of local levies is unconstitutional. Dorn says it allows richer districts to attract better teachers and implement better technology, leading to inevitable inequities between richer districts, like Spokane, and rural districts that can't raise levy dollars.

He says he doesn't blame school districts for doing this, but he hopes the lawsuit will force districts to join together and demand money from the state.

Instead, five of those districts are joining together, not to demand money from the legislature, but to ask King County Superior Court to set aside Dorn's lawsuit until *McCleary* is resolved. Spokane isn't one of those five districts, but Superintendent Shelley Redinger says she disagrees with the approach taken by Dorn, even while agreeing with the sentiment.

"He's a very passionate advocate. Very passionate," Redinger says. "And I think that's the way that it happens, is that sometimes that can be misconstrued and, unfortunately, it's been a distraction for schools. And I know he's well aware of that."

When state Sen. Michael Baumgartner heard of the lawsuit, he crafted a tweet.

"I don't know anybody in #waleg who doesn't think Randy Dorn isn't a total clown show. The parking attendant has more positive impact on K12," Baumgartner wrote.

Baumgartner, a Republican who represents Spokane's 6th District, says Dorn's pronouncements have had no impact on legislators.

"He just has no credibility and is a non-factor on what happens in education," Baumgartner says. "I've been in the legislature for six years ... not once have I heard any legislator pay attention to what Randy Dorn says."

Baumgartner notes that the state has increased spending on education by billions in the past four years. But it's still not on track to meet the *McCleary* deadline of 2018 to fully-fund education.

He says he doesn't understand why Dorn would stop a local community from raising more money for education, and he's skeptical that Olympia would do a better job spending education dollars than districts. He predicts the question of whether districts can use local levies will be sent to the voters.

Baumgartner says improving education in Washington should not be about more money in the system, but about reform. That means more choice, more parental involvement, lengthening the school year, and performance pay for teachers.

"I'm less than convinced that centralizing the model will lead to better outcomes," Baumgartner says.

Erin Jones, who served as assistant superintendent under Dorn for three years and is now running to replace him, says Dorn thought he would be able to get things done since he used to be a state representative from 1987-94. Then he realized it was more difficult than he thought.

"Once he didn't have a vote anymore, once he didn't have anything to trade, it became more challenging than he expected," Jones says.

She says in the years since she's stopped working for Dorn, she has observed him become more combative than she remembers him to be.

"He was not that fiery person when I worked there at all," she says. "The person who walked out of the legislature this year is not the same person I worked for."

Dorn says it comes down to the way he sees the game of politics.

"I seriously believe that politics is a contact sport. Yeah, you can collaborate, you can partner with people and you can inform them and you can educate them," Dorn says. "You gotta push people to get what you want done. This is what I want done and, yeah, I tend to push people."

Dorn had five things he wanted to emphasize as state superintendent when he first took the job. He wanted to expand all-day kindergarten, and he did. He wanted to support career and technical education, and he has. He wanted the graduation rate to rise, and it has improved.

But the two main issues he campaigned on in 2008 were shortening statewide tests and pushing for more funding for education. On both, the results are mixed. Dorn admits the "jury is still out" on testing. Dorn eliminated the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, replacing it with shorter statewide tests, and then replacing those with the Smarter Balanced assessment, which is aligned with Common Core standards. Today the Smarter Balanced test takes up about the same amount of time as the WASL.

Dorn says the person who takes over his job, either his former colleague Jones or state Rep. Chris Reykdal, will have to deal with the issue of testing, and also how to implement technology in districts across the state.

Reykdal says he would take a different approach in getting the legislature to fund *McCleary*.

"Rather than a hammer to the legislature, I want to bring them solutions. I want to help Republicans and Democrats understand the strengths and weaknesses on policy and budget ideas," Reykdal says.

Jones says the power for change lies with the people who vote lawmakers into office. She says the strongest tactic is to get teachers, students and families into committee meetings to tell their stories, and to tell the people they voted for to make the right decision.

As for Dorn, he says he's looking forward to taking a deep breath. He agrees a new voice might be ready to take over. He's looking forward to spending time at home in Eatonville, going places with his grandkids, and getting reacquainted with his golf game.

He says he just wants to know that when he steps away, he didn't shortchange kids.

"I just need to take a break from having the mic in my face. I told somebody the other day, 'I'm getting concerned I'm gonna tell people what I really think,'" Dorn says. "And somebody goes, 'You mean, you haven't?'" ♦